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SUBJECT: RUSSIA AND KOSOVO: THE POLITICS OF DELAY

REF: STATE 148147

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Russia will seek to delay the conclusion of the Kosovo status process beyond year's end, arguing that a negotiated settlement will be more enduring than one forced on Serbia. The GOR does not like UN Special Envoy Ahtisaari's draft status recommendations and might balk at agreeing to a statement following the September 20 Contact Group Ministerial in New York. While experts here agreed that Russia did not want status talks to end with an imposed settlement, most also concluded that Russia would not block such a decision because of broader geopolitical interests. However, this view was not unanimous; one well-respected observer thought it likely that Russia would veto any UN Security Council resolution imposing a solution on Kosovo. While the Russian Orthodox Church and nationalist politicians plan a campaign to express their public opposition to independence, observers believe mainstream domestic opinion will follow the Kremlin's lead. Russia will continue to argue that the Kosovo settlement will form a precedent for resolving other frozen conflicts to capitalize on doubts about the implications of Kosovar independence. End Summary.

MFA: THE PARTIES MUST AGREE

¶2. (C) The MFA's position on Kosovo status talks has been consistent since the January 31 London Contact Group (CG) Ministerial: opposition to "artificial deadlines" and "rigid ultimatums," support for a negotiated settlement, and a new emphasis on the Kosovo resolution as a precedent for other frozen conflicts. Amb. Botsan-Kharchenko, Russia's Contract Group representative, hewed closely to these lines in a September 15 conversation with us before departing for the CG Ministerial on the margins of UNGA. Confirming that FM Lavrov will participate in the talks, Botsan-Kharchenko underlined that Moscow had strong concerns about issuing a statement following the ministerial because of differences among CG members. Moscow does not like the current draft of UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari's nonpaper providing preliminary recommendations on Kosovo's future status. A statement might be viewed as an endorsement of the nonpaper; Lavrov will flag Russian concerns in a meeting with Ahtissari immediately before the CG meeting.

¶3. (C) Foreshadowing a possibly contentious meeting in New York, Botsan-Kharchenko said that Lavrov had underlined that the Ministerial would finally provide an opportunity for a serious discussion of next steps. Russia recognized the importance of CG unity, but at the same time Moscow insisted on the priority of finding a negotiated solution on status. Reviewing Belgrade's and Pristina's positions in the talks to date, he acknowledged they were far apart (while arguing that Serbia had been more flexible), and said that more time was needed for a compromise. He claimed that no one thought that such a compromise would be possible by year's end and that

the CG should not insist on it. He would not be drawn out on when he thought the process could be completed, arguing it was more important that the results be mutually acceptable than they be reached by a certain date, which might take "years." Russia remained more comfortable with substantial autonomy than independence, Botsan-Kharchenko stressed, and was opposed to Kosovo's membership in international organizations. He said that assistance from international financial institutions could be made available to Kosovo regardless of its status.

¶4. (C) Pointing to September 17 Transnistrian independence referendum, Botsan-Kharchenko said the Kosovar's insistence on independence was already having an effect on other frozen conflicts. On Kosovo's value as a precedent in other conflicts, he argued that the critical factor was whether a change in status came about as the result of negotiations or was imposed on a state.

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SERBIAN CHARGE KURJAK: HANDWRITING ON THE WALL?

¶5. (C) While Amb. Botsan-Kharchenko seemed intent on demonstrating Russia's unwillingness to accept a "rush to judgment," Serbian Charge d'Affaires Jelica Kurjak was skeptical about GOR support for Serbia as the Kosovo end game drew near. She told us she was not optimistic about Serbia's chances to retain Kosovo and did not believe that Moscow would endanger its relations with the U.S. and Europe to block consensus on Kosovo's final status. According to Kurjak, Botsan-Kharchenko had expressed pessimism to her over Serbia's prospects for retaining Kosovo, noting western unity in seeking independence by year's end. Russia, she said, would maneuver for space, seek to exploit divisions within

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the West over timing and highlight the potentially dangerous political repercussions for Serbia of an independent Kosovo. While it was possible that Russia might balk at an imposed solution (Kurjak cited the 2004 Russian veto in the Security Council of the Cyprus resolution as an example), the relationship between Belgrade and Moscow had steadily eroded; the GOR's support could not be counted on.

¶6. (C) Kurjak discounted the value of support from the Duma, pan-Slav nationalists and the Russian Orthodox Church. While they would all object to Kosovar independence, in the end, they would fall into line behind the likely Kremlin decision not to block a status decision. It was hard to live on "old myths and stereotypes" of Slav unity when the two states had grown apart. Serbia, she concluded, would fall victim to the GOR's embrace of a pragmatic foreign policy line. (Biographical Note: Kurjak, an academic, counts herself a personal friend of the Serbian President and is well-connected in Moscow. Kurjak alluded to GOR dissatisfaction with her policy line toward Russia, which culminated in its refusal to grant agreement this summer when the GOS put forward Kurjak as the replacement for the outgoing Ambassador. End Note.)

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SHIFT IN PRIORITIES

¶7. (C) Many of the experts we spoke to agreed that while Russia might seek to slow the process leading to Kosovo's independence, Moscow would not block this from happening, regardless of domestic public opinion. While Amb. Botsan-Kharchenko claimed that Kosovo remained a potent emotional symbol for the Russian public and was now back on the domestic agenda, other interlocutors were dubious. Pavel Kandel, an Balkans expert at the Institute of Europe, said that Russian policy toward Serbia had significantly evolved since the 1999 conflict; Moscow is no longer the "pro-Serb fortress" of western imagination. He acknowledged that the Russian public -- which is largely oblivious to most foreign policy issues -- paid attention to Serbia, but thought that

public opinion would not play a role in decision making. To the extent Russia had a Balkans policy, it was focused on the region's role in the transit and consumption of oil and gas, not on imperial nostalgia. Russia's relations with the U.S. and the West, not old ties to Belgrade, would influence how quickly Russia accepted the inevitability of Kosovo becoming independent.

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NO GUNS OF AUGUST

18. (C) Even if Russia wanted to help Serbia retain Kosovo, it lacked the ability to do so, according to Aleksey Bogaturov, Dean of International Politics at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), which is affiliated with the MFA. The 1999 dash by Russian peacekeepers for the Kosovo airport was the high-water mark of support for Serbia. That turned out to be an ill-planned and pathetic gesture. It felt good at home, showed the Serbs that Russia wanted to help, but ultimately was an embarrassment. It highlighted how little Russia could really do, Bogaturov explained. Those troops were no longer in the region, and Russia had no concrete way of helping the Serbs. Russia had a history of giving moral support to Serbia but little else. "We gave them real support in August 1914, and it had a disastrous result on Russia," he said. Besides, Bogaturov underlined, while the issue can at times strike an emotional chord with some Russians, public opinion is not as energized about Serbia as it was in 1999, during the height of the NATO air campaign against Milosovic's regime. Russia could help the Serbs after Kosovo gains independence, Bogaturov explained. If there is a move among Kosovar Serbs to separate from Kosovo and rejoin Serbia, Russia might lend a political hand. Russia could also keep international pressure on the Kosovar Albanians to protect Serb religious sites in Kosovo, he said.

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ORTHODOX CHURCH: A PUBLIC STAND

19. (C) While interest in the plight of the Serb minority in Kosovo might no longer evoke the same emotional reaction it did in 1999, some Russians are likely to object loudly and publicly to a status process that leads to Kosovo's independence. According to Father Vsevolod Chaplin, a spokesperson for the Russian Orthodox Church's (ROC) Moscow Patriarchate, religious organizations and elements of civil society planned to draw renewed public attention to the issue of Serbian and Orthodox rights in Kosovo. He singled out Russian Railways CEO Vladimir Yakunin -- a close Putin friend who is sometimes touted as a fall-back presidential candidate in 2008 -- as a leader of opposition to an "illegal" division

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of Serbia. (Yakunin has hinted at such a stance on Kosovo in recent conversations with the Ambassador.) Chaplin also said that a block of Duma members would raise questions about the status process with FM Lavrov and others. He predicted that October would see public rallies led by ROC and visiting Serbian Orthodox Church officials as well as extensive and positive media coverage from figures like Aleksey Pushkov, a Kremlin-friendly talk-show host with Moscow's TV Tsentr.

110. (C) Chaplin said the Church was focused on the protection of the Serb minority's rights and Orthodox religious and cultural monuments in Kosovo. In his view, the West was ignoring what was taking place to the Serbs in Kosovo. He said Patriarch Aleksey II believed that the views of all of Serbia needed to be taken into account in determining Kosovo's status, not just of those who lived in Kosovo. "Kosovo is for the Serbs like Jerusalem is for the Jews," Chaplin said, and a failure to guarantee respect for the Orthodox community in Kosovo would only lead to further bloodshed. Chaplin said that the decentralization proposals made so far were insufficient. While the weight of opinion in the ROC was flatly opposed to any form of Kosovar

independence because of the lack of protection for Serbs, Chaplin conceded that some saw a split as inevitable and would support the retention of Serb areas of northern Kosovo within Serbia while the remainder of Kosovo was subject to continued international oversight.

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TRENIN: ODD MAN OUT

¶11. (C) Unlike our other interlocutors, the Carnegie Center's Dmitriy Trenin did not see Russia grudgingly going along with Kosovo independence. In his view, Russia was likely to invoke its Security Council veto on a Kosovo resolution, motivated by the same considerations that drove its Cyprus veto in 2004. While Putin has yet to make a decision, Trenin believed that Russian policy would be driven by Serbia. If Serbia arrived at a consensus with the Kosovars, Russia would gladly accede to Kosovo's independence; however, he maintained, Russia was unlikely to approve the imposition of independence. Like the others, Trenin was skeptical about domestic considerations as an important variable in this foreign policy issue: the Duma and Church "will make noise and pretend that they are representatives of the people, but when they are made to understand the Kremlin's decision, they will go along." Trenin thought it was unlikely that the Kremlin would abstain on an issue as important as Kosovo, simply because it was unseemly for a "power" to behave in this matter on an issue of international import.

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WHAT KIND OF PRECEDENT?

¶12. (C) Since President Putin's January 31 press conference remark asking rhetorically why South Ossetia and Abkhazia could not be independent if Kosovo was given independence, speculation has been rife about the specific effect Putin's comment would have on Russia's Kosovo policy as well as on its treatment of other frozen conflicts. The MFA has told us multiple times that it was difficult to argue that Kosovo was unique and that as a factual matter the Kosovo decision would affect how leaders in other separatist regions viewed their own futures. While some Russian observers have been vague in explaining precisely what precedent they would draw from Kosovo independence, diplomats (including Amb. Botsan-Kharchenko) use the "precedent" argument to underline that a negotiated settlement of Kosovo between the parties would be a positive precedent for resolving other frozen conflicts. The obverse -- that a solution "imposed" on Serbia would in some fashion allow other separatist regions to become independent -- does not receive as much attention from the MFA.

¶13. (C) Experts we have talked to take very different views on the "precedent" argument. MGIMO's Bogaturov said the GOR might use the Kosovo issue as an opportunity to try to legitimize the pro-Russian statelets of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Russia could take advantage of the Kosovo issue to press the case of independence for these regions, he said. After Kosovo gains independence, Russia could start to change the way it talks about these areas. "In the past, we have said we recognize the territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova," Bogaturov explained. "After Kosovo leaves Serbia, we could say that these areas have de-facto independence. It will be slow and deliberate, but our position will change and we won't talk about territorial integrity of Georgia and Moldova anymore." In contrast, Carnegie's Trenin discounted GOR motivations to seize upon Kosovo as a model for the frozen conflicts in post-Soviet space. While Putin believed that Kosovo would

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become a precedent, it is not one that he wants to invoke, Trenin emphasized. Any change to the post-Soviet borders, even in a territory as remote and insignificant as South Ossetia, would render every post-Soviet border "conditional."

The prospect of instability was substantial. The GOR also was concerned with future applications of a Kosovo model against Russian territorial integrity.

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COMMENT

¶14. (C) We expect the GOR to make every effort to slow down the status process beyond the end of the year. The "precedent" argument will continue to do double duty -- by bolstering the Serbian case against independence and by raising doubts about the broader implications of Kosovo independence among members of the Contact Group and other concerned states like Ukraine. This strategy has its own limitations in the face of a determined push in the CG and, in the end, Moscow will likely have to face the question of whether to try to block Kosovo independence in the Security Council. If Russia's 2004 veto of the Cyprus resolution serves as a model, Moscow might wait until the eleventh hour to reveal its intentions. With the 2007-2008 Russian political season looming just ahead, it would be a mistake to underestimate the temptation to veto in the Kremlin.

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